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DR. HUNTER S. THOMPSON

Fear & Loathing: The Banshee Screams for the Buffalo

ANNIE LEIBOVITZ

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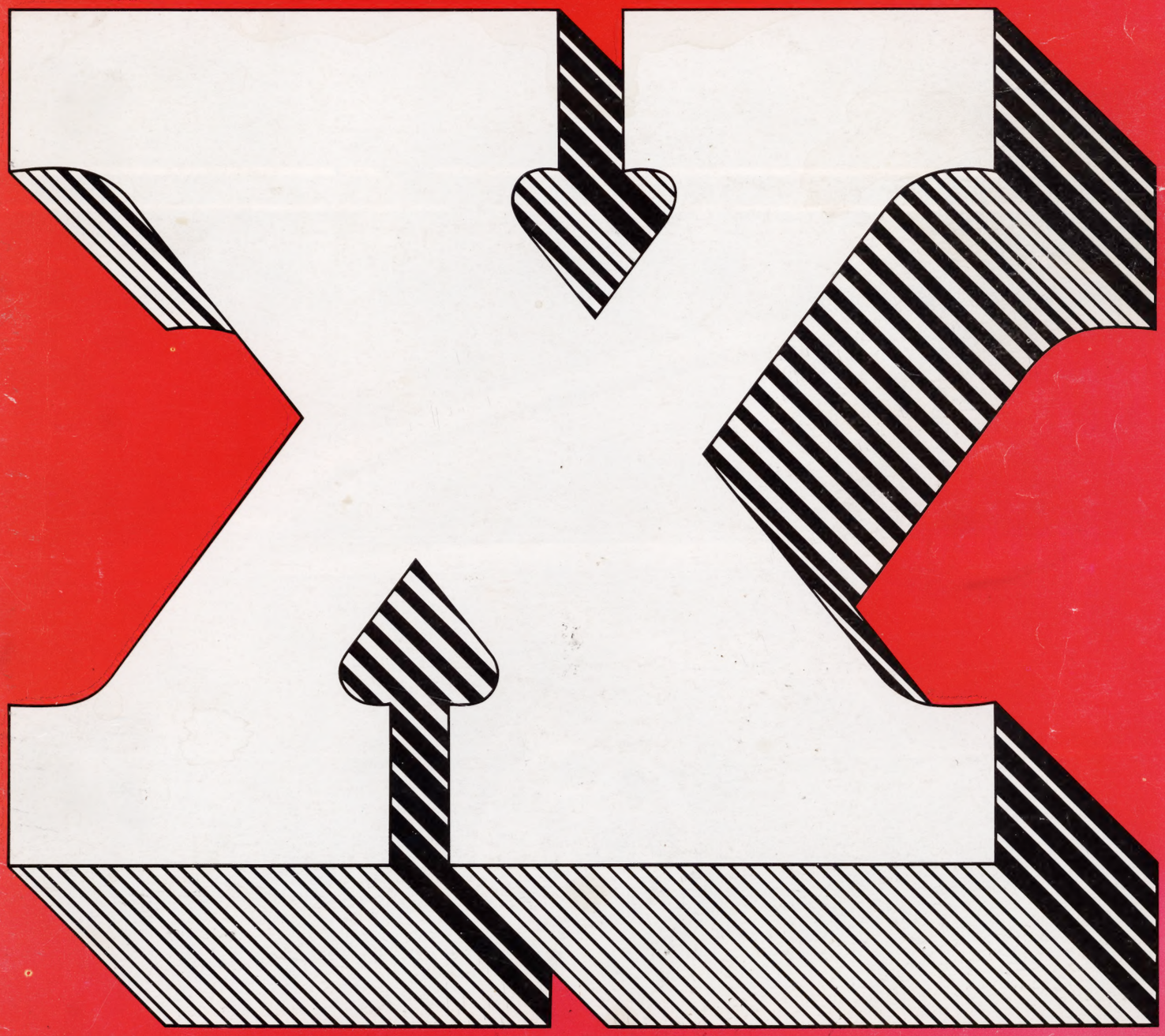


FEAR & LOATHING IN THE GRAVEYARD OF THE WEIRD

THE BANSHEE SCREAMS FOR BUFFALO MEAT

REQUIEM FOR A CRAZED HEAVYWEIGHT.... AN UNFINISHED MEMOIR ON THE LIFE AND DOOM OF OSCAR ZETA ACOSTA, FIRST & LAST OF THE SAVAGE BROWN BUFFALOS....HE CRAWLED WITH LEPERS AND LAWYERS, BUT HE WAS TALL ON HIS OWN HIND LEGS WHEN HE WALKED AT NIGHT WITH THE KING....

DR. HUNTER S. THOMPSON

The following memoir by Dr. Thompson is the painful result of a nine-week struggle (between the Management and the author) regarding the style, tone, length, payment, etc.—but mainly the subject matter *of the National Affairs Desk's contribution to this star-crossed Tenth Anniversary Issue. . . .*

And in at least momentary fairness to the Management, we should note that the term "star-crossed" is Dr. Thompson's—as are all other harsh judgments he was finally compelled to submit. . . .

"We work in the dark, we do what we can." Some poet who never met Werner Erhard said that, but so what?

What began as a sort of riptide commentary on "the meaning of the Sixties" soon turned into a wild and hydra-headed screed on Truth, Vengeance, Journalism and the meaning, such as it is, of Jimmy Carter.

But none of these things could be made to fit in the space we had available—so we were finally forced to compromise with The Doc and his people, who had all along favored a long, dangerous and very costly piece titled: "The Search for the Brown Buffalo."

It was Dr. Thompson's idea to have ROLLING STONE *finance this open-ended search for one of his friends who disappeared under mean and mysterious circumstances in the late months of 1974, or perhaps the early months of 1975. The Brown Buffalo was the nom de plume of the Chicano attorney from East Los Angeles who gained international notoriety as the brutal and relentless "300-pound Samoan attorney" in Thompson's book, 'Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas.'—The Editors*

Nobody knows the weirdness I've seen
On the trail of the brown buffalo—OLD BLACK JOE

I WALK IN THE NIGHT RAIN UNTIL THE DAWN OF THE NEW day. I have devised the plan, straightened out the philosophy and set up the organization. When I have the 1 million Brown Buffalos on my side I will present the demands for a new nation to both the U.S. Government and the United Nations . . . and then I'll split and write the book. I have no desire to be a politician. I don't want to lead anyone. I have no practical ego. I am not ambitious. I merely want to do what is right. Once in every century there comes a man who is chosen to speak for his people. Moses, Mao and Martin [Luther King Jr.] are examples. Who's to say that I am not such a man? In this day and age the man for all seasons needs many voices. Perhaps that is why the gods have sent me into Riverbank, Panama, San Francisco, Alpine and Juarez. Perhaps that is why I've been taught so many trades. Who will deny that I am unique.

—OSCAR ACOSTA, *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* *

WELL . . . NOT ME, OLD SPORT. WHEREVER you are and in whatever shape—dead or alive or even *both*, eh? That's one thing they can't take away from you. . . . Which is lucky, I think, for the rest of us: Because (and, yeah—let's face it, Oscar) you were not real light on your feet in this world, and you were too goddamn heavy for most of the boats you jumped into. One of the great regrets of my life is that I was never able to introduce you to my old football buddy, Richard Nixon. The main thing he feared in this life—even worse than Queers and Jews and Mutants—was people who might run amok; he called them "loose cannons on the deck," and he wanted them all put to sleep.

That's one graveyard we never even checked, Oscar, but why not? If your classic "doomed nigger" style of paranoia had any validity at all, you *must* understand that it was not just Richard Nixon who was out to get you—but all the people who thought like Nixon and all the judges and U.S. attorneys he appointed in those weird years. Were there any of Nixon's friends among all those Superior Court judges you subpoenaed and mocked and humiliated when you were trying to bust the grand jury selection system in L.A.? How many of those Brown Beret "bodyguards" you called "brothers" were deep-cover cops or informants? I recall being seriously worried about that when we were working on that story about the killing of Chicano journalist Ruben Salazar by an L.A. County sheriff's deputy. How many of those bomb-throwing, trigger-happy freaks who slept on mattresses in your apartment were talking to the sheriff on a chili-hall pay phone every morning? Or maybe to the judges who kept jailing you for contempt of court, when they didn't have anything else?

YEAH, AND SO MUCH FOR THE "PARANOID Sixties." It's time to end this bent seance—or *almost* closing time, anyway—but before we get back to raw facts and rude lawyer's humor, I want to make sure that at least one record will show that I tried and totally failed, for at least five years, to convince my allegedly erstwhile Samoan attorney, Oscar Zeta Acosta, that *there was no such thing as paranoia*: At least not in that cultural and political war zone called "East L.A." in the late 1960s and especially not for an aggressively radical "Chicano Lawyer" who thought he could stay up all night, *every* night, eating acid and throwing "Molotov cocktails" with the same people he was going to have to represent in a downtown courtroom the next morning.

There were times—all too often, I felt—when Oscar would show up in front of the courthouse at nine in the morning with a stench of fresh gasoline on his hands and a green crust of charred soap-flakes on the toes of his $300 snakeskin cowboy boots. He would pause outside the courtroom just long enough to give the TV press five minutes of crazed rhetoric for the Evening News, then he would shepherd his equally crazed "clients" into the courtroom for their daily war-circus with the Judge. When you get into bear baiting on that level, paranoia is just another word for ignorance. . . . They really *are* out to get you.

The odds on his being dragged off to jail for "contempt" were about fifty-fifty on any given day—which meant he was always in danger of being seized and booked with a pocket full of "bennies" or "black beauties" at the property desk. After several narrow escapes he decided that it was necessary to work in the courtroom as part of a three-man "defense team."

One of his "associates" was usually a well-dressed, well-mannered young Chicano whose only job was to carry at least 100 milligrams of pure speed at all times and feed Oscar whenever he signaled; the other was not so well-dressed or mannered; his job was to stay alert and be one step ahead of the bailiffs when they made a move on Oscar—at which point he would reach out and grab any pills, powders, shivs or other evidence he was handed, then sprint like a human bazooka for the nearest exit.

This strategy worked so well for almost two years that Oscar and his people finally got careless. They had survived another long day in court—on felony arson charges, this time, for trying to burn down the Biltmore Hotel during a speech by then Governor Ronald Reagan—and they were driving back home to Oscar's headquarters pad in the barrio (and maybe running sixty or sixty-five in a fifty m.p.h. speed zone, Oscar later admitted) when they were suddenly jammed to a stop by two LAPD cruisers. "They acted like we'd just robbed a bank," said Frank, looking right down the barrel of a shotgun. "They made us all lie face down on the street and then they searched the car, and—"

Yes. That's when they found the drugs: twenty or thirty white pills that the police quickly identified as "illegal amphetamine tablets, belonging to Attorney Oscar Acosta."

The fat spic for all seasons was jailed once again, this time on what the press called a "high speed drug bust." Oscar called a press conference in jail and accused the cops of "planting" him—but not even his bodyguards believed him until long after the attendant publicity had done them all so much damage that the whole "Brown Power Movement" was effectively stalled, splintered and discredited by the time *all* charges, both Arson and Drugs, were either dropped or reduced to small print on the back of the blotter.

I am not even sure, myself, how the cases were finally disposed of. Not long after the "high speed drug bust," as I recall, two of his friends were charged with Murder One for allegedly killing a smack dealer in the barrio, and I think Oscar finally copped on the drug charge and pled guilty to something like "possession of ugly pills in a public place."

But by that time his deal had already gone down. None of the respectable Chicano pols in East L.A. had ever liked him anyway, and that "high speed drug bust" was all they needed to publicly denounce everything Left of *huevos rancheros* and start calling themselves Mexican-American again. The trial of the Biltmore Five was no longer a do-or-die cause for La Raza, but a shameful crime that a handful of radical dope fiends had brought down on the whole community. The mood on Whittier Boulevard turned sour overnight, and the sight of a Brown Beret was suddenly as rare as a cash-client for Oscar Zeta Acosta—the ex-Chicano Lawyer.

The entire ex-Chicano political community went as public as possible to make sure that the rest of the city understood that they had known all along that this dope addict *rata* who had somehow been one of their most articulate and certainly their most radical, popular and politically aggressive spokesman for almost two years was really just a self-seeking publicity dope freak who couldn't even run a bar tab at the Silver Dollar Cafe, much less rally friends or a following. There was no mention in the Mexican-American press about Acosta's surprisingly popular campaign for sheriff of L.A. County a year earlier, which had made him a minor hero among politically hip Chicanos all over the city.

No more of that dilly-dong bullshit on Whittier Boulevard. Oscar's drug bust was still alive on the Evening News when he was evicted from his apartment on three days' notice and his car was either stolen or towed away from its customary parking place on the street in front of his driveway. His offer to defend his two friends on what he later assured me were absolutely valid charges of first degree murder were publicly rejected. Not even for free, they said. A dope-addled clown was worse than no lawyer at all.

It was dumb gunsel thinking, but Oscar was in no mood to offer his help more than once. So he beat a strategic retreat to Mazatlan, which he called

* © 1972 BY OSCAR ZETA ACOSTA, STRAIGHT ARROW BOOKS.

his "other home," to lick his wounds and start writing the Great Chicano novel. It was the end of an era! The fireball Chicano lawyer was on his way to becoming a half-successful writer, a cult figure of sorts—then a fugitive, a freak, and finally either a permanently missing person or an undiscovered corpse.

Oscar's fate is still a mystery, but every time his case seems to be finally closed, something happens to bring him back to life. . . . And one of them just happened again, but it came in a blizzard of chaos that caused a serious time warp in my thinking: my nerves are still too jangled for the moment to do anything but lay back and let it blow over.

THE FLASH MAN COMETH . . . . QUEER NEWS FROM COCONUT GROVE . . . . MURDER, MADNESS & THE BATTLE OF BISCAYNE BAY . . . . THE DEATH OF A CIGARETTE BOAT & A $48,000 MISUNDERSTANDING . . . . RES IPSA LOQUITOR . . . .

A SCREECH OWL THE SIZE OF A CHOW KILLED TWO OF MY peacocks on the front porch. The county attorney called the cops on me for interfering with the work of a labor crew painting yellow stripes on the Woody Creek Road. That antique winch-powered crossbow that Steadman sent over from England was seized and destroyed by sheriff's deputies and a man named Drake from Miami spent all afternoon at the Hotel Jerome, demanding my phone number from the bartenders because he claimed to have a bizarre message for me.

Then Sandy came back from the store with the mail and the latest issue of *Newsweek*, the one with the photo of Caroline Kennedy rolling Jann through the door of Elaine's on that custom-built, cut-glass dolly from Neiman-Marcus. Sandy didn't even recognize him at first; she thought it was a photo of Caroline and Bella Abzug on the campaign trail.

We went out on the porch, where there was plenty of light, to get a better look at the photos—but the sun made me blind for a moment, and just then Tom Benton came howling into the driveway on his 880 Husqavarna, and when he saw that story in *Newsweek* (you know Tom, with that fine artist's eye that he has), he said, "Well I'll be fucked, that's Jann! And look at the wonderful *smile* on him. Wow! And look what he's done to his *hair* . . . and those *teeth*. No wonder he moved to New York."

Benton was taking off his leathers as he talked. He'd been riding up on the logging roads in the high pastures behind his house, looking for a rogue bear that tore the top off his jeep and killed his mule last week.

"I just want to hit him with this Taser, then chain him to a tree until we can go up and get him."

"Get him?"

He nodded. "It's that grizzly pup that Noonan turned loose before he left town. He's about a year and a half old by now, and he's starting to act crazy."

"Fuck the Taser," I said. "It's no good beyond fifteen feet. We'll need the M-79, with CS grenades, then drag him down with a jeep."

"No," he said. "I want to get the bugger in a van, then drive him into town and back the van right up to the side door of that restaurant where all the lawyers eat lunch. They'll love him."

"Wonderful," I said. "Shoot him right into that private dining room where they have those Bar Association luncheons—feed him a whole bucket full of acid and raw meat, then take him into town for the meeting."

Benton started to laugh, then stopped and reached into one of his pockets and handed me a small envelope. "Speaking of lawyers," he said, "I almost forgot—there's a guy from Miami in town who says he has a message for you, from Oscar."

I flinched and stepped back. "What?" I said. "Who?"

"Yeah," Benton said. "Oscar Acosta, the Brown Buffalo."

He shook his head. "This guy has a very *very* strange story. It's so strange that I wasn't even sure I should come out here and tell you."

"I know all those stories," I said. "Hell I wrote most of them—and besides, Oscar's dead."

Tom opened two more beers and handed me one.

"Not according to this guy Drake," he said quietly. "He says Oscar almost got killed about two months ago in Florida. They took a midnight ride out to Bimini in Drake's boat, and on the way back they got ambushed at sea and a friend of Oscar's got killed—and Drake's $48,000 Cigarette boat was a total wreck; he says it was so full of bullet holes that they almost sunk in midocean."

"Bullshit," I said. "That's impossible."

He shrugged. "Well, that's what Solheim said. But he talked to Drake for a long time last night and he says the guy is absolutely positive. He even had a photo." I suddenly remembered the envelope I'd been holding. "Let's see what this is," I said, tearing off the end. Inside was a paperback book cover, folded lengthwise—the cover of Oscar's *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*, with a picture of the author on the front and a message scrawled on the blank side. "Dear Thompson," it said. "Please call me as soon as you can. Very urgent. Acosta might be in bad trouble. HEAT! Not much time. Call me in #353 Hotel Jerome. Thanks. Drake."

"Jesus," I muttered. "Why the hell does he want to talk to *me*?"

"He's looking for Oscar," Benton replied. "And so is the Coast Guard—and the DEA and the FBI and half the cops in Miami."

"So what?" I said. "He's been dead for two years."

Tom shook his head. "No, Drake says he's still working in and out of Florida, running a *lot* of white powder."

"I doubt it," I said.

"Well Drake doesn't," he replied, "and he's about to turn him over, unless Oscar pays for his boat. He wants forty grand and he says he knows Oscar has the money."

"Balls," I said. "We should have this bastard locked up for blackmail."

He shrugged again. "Hang on. You haven't heard the rest of it. Drake's talking about *murder*, not drugs."

"Murder?"

"Yeah. Drake says the Coast Guard came up with *three* bodies after that ambush, and two of them didn't have heads. Oscar ran that Cigarette boat right over the top of a Boston Whaler with at least two guys in it."

I stared at him for a moment, then went over to the couch and sat down. "Jesus Christ!" I said. "Let's go back and run the whole story again. I must have missed something."

You are better lost than found.
—CLEMENT ROBINSON

WHICH WAS TRUE. THE STORY I GOT from Benton was from Mike Solheim, who got it in spades from a total stranger who said his name was Drake and who showed up in Aspen one afternoon, looking for me because he thought I could put him in touch with Oscar Acosta—a "dead man" who somehow showed up at Drake's home in Coconut Grove one night last summer and offered $5000 in cash for a midnight ride out to Bimini and back in Drake's new $48,000 ocean racer, with no questions asked.

It was not the kind of business proposition that a veteran dope smuggler like Drake would have been likely to misunderstand. There are only two possible reasons for even *owning* a thirty-five-foot-long bullet-shaped

fiberglass hull with *two* 370 horsepower engines on the back: One is to win races in the open sea at speeds up to 90.555 miles an hour (the current world record, set by the "World Champion Cigarette Racing Team" in 1976) and the other has to do with the virtually priceless peace of mind that comes with doing business in a boat that will outrun anything the U.S. Coast Guard can put in the water.

So there was no need for Drake to ask *why* these two cash-heavy Mexicans needed his boat, or even why one of them came aboard with a Uzi submachine gun. He had made this run before, and even on moonless nights he felt he knew every bump in the water, even at sixty miles an hour. . . .

But he was not ready for what happened on the way back from Bimini *this* time: They were almost home, slowing down to half-speed or less about a mile off the south tip of Key Biscayne, when he was suddenly blinded by spotlights coming into his face from the front and both sides and the whole night erupted with gunfire. The Mexican with the Uzi was dead on his feet before Drake even heard the first shots; the Uzi bounced into the water and the Mexican sat down in the cockpit with at least ten big holes in his chest. Drake felt his boat shuddering in the water as the hull started coming apart in the crossfire. "We're surrounded!" he screamed. "They're killing us!" Then he fell down and tried to hide himself under the dead man just as Oscar got his hands on both the wheel and the throttle at the same time. The big speedboat lunged forward with a roar and the next thing Drake felt was an airborne jolt as his boat ran straight over the top of a twenty-foot Boston Whaler . . . and suddenly there was no more shooting as he felt the boat moving toward Miami at sixty miles an hour with the cockpit six inches deep in blood-colored water and Oscar screaming in Spanish as they started coming up, too fast, on the lights of Dinner Key.

Drake stood up and took the wheel. The boat felt like it was coming apart in his hands as he aimed for a clump of trees on the dark end of the marina. By the time he felt the jolt of a sandbar under his feet, Oscar was already going over the side with the small suitcase they had picked up in Bimini, and that was the last time Drake saw him.

The boat stayed miraculously afloat long enough for him to hump the dead man and dump his $48,000 wreck about a half-mile down the beach in a place where he could drive it up under some branches and watch it sink out of sight in five feet of dark water. Drake covered the hulk as well as he could, then slogged out to Biscayne Boulevard and hitchhiked back to Coconut Grove where he spent the next forty-eight hours locked in his bedroom and trembling with a fear worse than anything he'd ever felt in his life.

This wild and puzzling story out of Coconut Grove was only the latest of a dozen or so "Brown Buffalo sightings" in the past two years. Everybody who knew him as even a casual friend has heard stories about Oscar's "secret life" and his high-speed criminal adventures all over the world. Ever since his alleged death/disappearance in 1973, '74 or even 1975, he's turned up all over the world—selling guns in Addis Ababa, buying orphans in Cambodia, smoking weed with Henry Kissinger in Acapulco, hanging around the airport bar in Lima with two or three overstuffed Pan Am flight bags on both shoulders or hunched impatiently on the steering wheel of a silver 450 Mercedes in the "Nothing to Declare" lane on the Mexican side of U.S. Customs checkpoint between San Diego and Tijuana.

There are not many gypsies on file at the Missing Persons Bureau—and if Oscar was not quite the classic gypsy, in his own eyes or mine, it was only because he was never able to cut that high-tension cord that kept him forever attached to his childhood home and hatchery. By the time he was twenty years old, Oscar was working overtime eight days a week at learning to live and even think like a gypsy, but he never quite jumped the gap.

ALTHOUGH I WAS BORN IN EL PASO, TEXAS, I AM ACTUALLY a small town kid. A hick from the sticks, a Mexican boy from the other side of the tracks. I grew up in Riverbank, California; Post Office Box 303; population 3969. It's the only town in the entire state whose essential numbers have remained unchanged. The sign that welcomes you as you round the curve coming in from Modesto says THE CITY OF ACTION.

We lived in a two-room shack without a floor. We had to pump our water and use kerosene if we wanted to read at night. But we never went hungry. My old man always bought the pinto beans and the white flour for the tortillas in one-hundred-pound sacks which my mother used to make dresses, sheets and curtains. We had two acres of land which we planted every year with corn, tomatoes and yellow chiles for the hot sauce. Even before my father woke us, my old ma was busy at work making the tortillas at five a.m. while he chopped the logs we'd hauled up from the river on the weekends.

Riverbank is divided into three parts, and in my corner of the world there were only three kinds of people: Mexicans, Okies and Americans. Catholics, Holy Rollers and Protestants. Peach pickers, cannery workers and clerks.

We lived on the West Side, within smelling distance of the world's largest tomato paste cannery.

The West Side is still enclosed by the Santa Fe Railroad tracks to the east, the Modesto-Oakdale Highway to the north and the irrigation canal to the south. Within that concentration only Mexicans were safe from the neighborhood dogs, who responded only to Spanish commands. Except for Bob Whitt and Emitt Brown, both friends of mine who could cuss in better Spanish than I, I never saw a white person walking the dirt roads of our neighborhood.

—OSCAR ACOSTA, *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*, 1972

THE LAWN OF FIRE AND ANOTHER ICE-PICK FOR RICHARD NIXON FOR OLD TIMES' SAKE . . . . SLOW FADEOUT FOR BROWN POWER & A SALUTE TO CRAZY ED. . . . POISON FAT GOES TO MAZATLAN; LIBEL LAWYERS GO TO THE MATTRESSES . . . .FEAR OF THE PLASTIC FORK & A TWISTED COMPROMISE. . . .

OSCAR ZETA ACOSTA—DESPITE ANY CLAIMS TO THE contrary—was a dangerous thug who lived every day of his life as a stalking monument to the notion that a man with a greed for the Truth should expect no mercy and give none . . .

. . . and that was the difference between Oscar and a lot of the merciless geeks he liked to tell strangers he admired: class acts like Benito Mussolini and Fatty Arbuckle.

When the great scorer comes to write against Oscar's name, one of the first few lines in the Ledger will note that he usually lacked the courage of his consistently monstrous convictions. There was more mercy, madness, dignity and generosity in that overweight, overworked and always overindulged brown cannonball of a body than most of us will meet in any human package even three times Oscar's size for the rest of our lives—which are all running noticeably leaner on the high side, since that rotten fat spic disappeared.

He was a drug-addled brute and a genuinely fiendish adversary in court or on the street—but it was none of *these* things that finally pressured him into death or a disappearance so finely plotted that it amounts to the same thing.

What finally cracked the Brown Buffalo was the bridge he refused to build between the self-serving elegance of his instincts and the self-destructive carnival of his reality. He was a Baptist missionary at a leper colony in Panama before he was a lawyer in Oakland and East L.A., or a radical-chic author in San Francisco and Beverly Hills. . . . But whenever

things got tense or when he had to work close to the bone, he was always a missionary. And that was the governing instinct that ruined him for anything else. He was a preacher in the courtroom, a preacher at the typewriter and a flat-out awesome preacher when he cranked his head full of acid.

That's LSD-25, folks—a certified "dangerous drug" that is no longer fashionable, due to reasons of extreme and unnatural heaviness. The CIA was right about acid: Some of their best and brightest operatives went over the side in the name of Top Secret research on a drug that was finally abandoned as a far too dangerous and unmanageable thing to be used as a public weapon. Not even the sacred minnock of "national security" could justify the hazards of playing with a thing too small to be seen and too big to control. The professional spook mentality was far more comfortable with things like nerve gas and neutron bombs.

But not the Brown Buffalo—he ate LSD-25 with a relish that bordered on worship. When his brain felt bogged down in the mundane nuts and bolts horrors of the Law or some dead-end manuscript, he would simply take off in his hotrod Mustang for a week on the road and a few days of what he called "walking with the King." Oscar used acid like other lawyers use Valium—a distinctly unprofessional and occasionally nasty habit that shocked even the most liberal of his colleagues and frequently panicked his clients.

I was with him one night in L.A. when he decided that the only way to meaningfully communicate with a Judge who'd been leaning on him in the courtroom was to drive out to the man's home in Santa Monica and set his whole front lawn on fire after soaking it down with ten gallons of gasoline . . . and then, instead of fleeing into the night like some common lunatic vandal, Oscar stood in the street and howled through the flames at a face peering out from a shattered upstairs window, delivering one of his Billy Sunday style sermons on morality and justice.

The nut of his flame-enraged text, as I recall, was this mind-bending chunk of eternal damnation from Luke 11:46—a direct quote from Jesus Christ:

"And he said, Woe unto you also, ye lawyers, for ye lade men with burdens grievous to be borne, and ye yourselves touch not the burdens with one of your fingers."

The Lawn of Fire was Oscar's answer to the Ku Klux Klan's burning cross, and he derived the same demonic satisfaction from doing it.

"Did you see his face?" he shouted as we screeched off at top speed toward Hollywood. "That corrupt old fool! I *know* he recognized me but he'll never admit it! No officer of the court would set a Judge's front yard on fire—the whole system would break down if lawyers could get away with crazy shit like this."

I agreed. It is not my wont to disagree with even a criminally insane attorney on questions of basic law. But in truth it never occurred to me that Oscar was either insane or a criminal, given the generally fascist, Nixonian context of those angry years.

In an era when the Vice President of the United States held court in Washington to accept payoffs from his former vassals in the form of big wads of one hundred dollar bills—and when the President himself routinely held secretly tape-recorded meetings with his top aides in the Oval Office to plot illegal wiretaps, political burglaries and other gross felonies in the name of a "silent majority," it was hard to feel anything more than a flash of high, nervous humor at the sight of some acid-bent lawyer setting fire to a Judge's front yard at four o'clock in the morning.

I might even be tempted to justify a thing like that —but of course *it would be wrong*. . . . And my attorney was Not a Crook and to the best of my knowledge, his mother was just as much "a saint" as Richard Nixon's.

Indeed. And now—as an almost perfect tribute to every icepick ever wielded in the name of Justice—I want to enter into the permanent record, at this point, as a strange but unchallenged fact that Oscar Z. Acosta was never disbarred from the practice of law in the state of California—and ex-President Richard Nixon *was*.

There are *some* things, apparently, that not even lawyers will tolerate; and in a naturally unjust world where the image of "Justice" is honored for being blind, even a blind pig will find an acorn once in a while.

Or maybe not—because Oscar was eventually hurt far worse by professional ostracism than Nixon was hurt by disbarment. The Great Banshee screamed for them both at almost the same time—for entirely different reasons, but with ominously similar results.

Except that Richard Nixon got rich from his crimes, and Oscar Acosta got killed. The wheels of Justice grind small and queer in this life and if they seem occasionally unbalanced or even stupid and capricious in their grinding, my own midnight guess is that they were probably fixed from the start. And any Judge who can safely slide into full pension retirement without having to look back on anything worse in the way of criminal vengeance than a few scorched lawns is a man who got off easy.

There is, after all, considerable work and risk—and even a certain art—to the torching of a half-acre lawn without also destroying the house or exploding every car in the driveway. It would be a lot easier to simply make a funeral pyre of the whole place and leave the lawn for dilettantes.

That's how Oscar viewed arson—anything worth doing is worth doing well— and I'd watched enough of his fiery work to know he was right. If he was a King-Hell Pyromaniac, he was also a gut politician and occasionally a very skilled artist in the style and tone of his torchings.

Like most lawyers with an IQ higher than sixty, Oscar learned one definition of Justice in Law school, and a very different one in the courtroom. He got his degree at some night school on Post Street in San Francisco, while working as a copy boy for the Hearst *Examiner*. And for a while he was very proud to be a lawyer—for the same reasons he'd felt proud to be a missionary and lead clarinet man in the leper colony band.

But by the time I first met him in the summer of 1967, he was long past what he called his "puppy love trip with The Law." It had gone the same way of his earlier missionary zeal, and after one year of casework at an East Oakland "poverty law center" he was ready to dump Holmes and Brandeis for Huey Newton and a Black Panther style of dealing with the laws and courts of America.

When he came booming into a bar called Daisy Duck in Aspen and announced that he was the trouble we'd all been waiting for, he was definitely into the politics of confrontation—and on all fronts: in the bars or the courts or even the streets, if necessary.

Oscar was not into serious street-fighting, but he was hell on wheels in a bar brawl. Any combination of a 250-pound Mexican and LSD-25 is a potentially terminal menace for anything it can reach—but when the alleged Mexican is in fact a profoundly angry Chicano lawyer with no fear at all of anything that walks on less than three legs and a de facto suicidal conviction that he *will* die at the age of thirty-three—just like Jesus Christ—you have a serious piece of work on your hands. Specially if the bastard is *already* thirty-three and a half years old with a head full of Sandoz acid, a loaded .357 Magnum in his belt, a hatchet-wielding Chicano bodyguard on his elbow at all times, and a disconcerting habit of projectile-vomiting geysers of pure red blood off the front porch every thirty or forty minutes, or whenever his malignant ulcer can't handle any more raw tequila.

This was the Brown Buffalo in the full crazed flower of his prime—a man, indeed, for all seasons. And it was somewhere in the middle of his thirty-third year, in fact, when he came out to Colorado—with his faithful bodyguard, Frank—to rest for a while after his grueling campaign for Sheriff of Los Angeles County, which he lost by a million or so votes. But in defeat, Oscar had managed to create an instant political base for himself in the vast Chicano barrio of East Los Angeles—where even the most conservative of the old-line "Mexican-Americans" were suddenly calling themselves "Chicanos" and getting their first taste of tear gas at "La Raza" demonstrations, which Oscar was quickly learning to use as a fire and brimstone forum to feature himself as the main spokesman for a mushrooming "Brown Power" movement that the LAPD called more dangerous than the Black Panthers.

Which was probably true, at the time—but in retrospect it sounds a bit different than it did back in 1969 when the sheriff was sending out fifteen or twenty helicopter sorties a night to scan the rooftops and backyards of the barrio with huge sweeping searchlights that drove Oscar and his people into fits of blind rage every time they got nailed in a pool of blazing white light with a joint in one hand and a machete in the other.

But that is another and very long story—and since I've already written it once ("Strange Rumblings in Aztlan," RS 81) and came close to getting my throat slit in the process, I think we'll just ease off and pass on it for right now.

The sad tale of Oscar's fall from grace in the barrio is still rife with bad

blood and ugly paranoia. He was too stunned to fight back in the time-honored style of a professional politician. He was also broke, divorced, depressed and so deep in public disgrace in the wake of his "high speed drug bust" that not even junkies would have him for an attorney.

In a word, he and his dream of "one million brown buffalos" were *finished* in East L.A. . . . and everywhere else where it counted, for that matter, so Oscar "took off" once again, and once again with a head full of acid.

But. . .

PEACOCKS CAN'T LIVE AT THIS ALTITUDE . . . . NEW HOME FOR EBB TIDE, FALSE DAWN IN ATZLAN AND A CHAIN OF BULL MAGGOTS ON THE NECK OF THE FAT SPIC FROM RIVERBANK . . . . MAY LEECHES CRAWL ON HIS SOUL UNTIL THE RIVERS FLOW UP FROM THE SEA AND THE GRASS GROWS DOWN INTO HELL . . . . BEWARE OF 300-POUND SAMOAN ATTORNEYS BEARING GIFTS OF LSD-25

Follow not truth too near the heels, lest it dash out thy teeth.
—GEORGE HERBERT, *Jacula Prudentum*

WELL . . . IT IS NOT AN EASY THING TO SIT HERE AND KEEP a straight face while even considering the notion that there is any connection at all between Oscar's sorry fate and his lifelong devotion to defending the truth at all costs. There are a lot of people still wandering around, especially in places like San Francisco and East L.A., who would like nothing better than to dash out Oscar's teeth with a ball-peen hammer for all the weird and costly lies he laid on them at one point or another *in his frenzied assaults* on the way to his place in the sun. He never denied he was a lying pig who would use any means to justify his better end. Even his friends felt the sting. Yet there were times when he took himself as seriously as any other bush league Mao or Moses, and in moments like these he was capable of rare insights and a naive sort of grace in his dealings with people that often touched on nobility. At its best, the Brown Buffalo shuffle was a match for Muhammad Ali's.

After I'd known him for only three days he made me a solemn gift of a crude wooden idol that I am still not sure he didn't occasionally worship in secret when not in the presence of the dreaded "white ass gabancos." In a paragraph near the end of his autobiography, he describes that strangely touching transfer far better than I can.

"I opened my beat-up suitcase and took out my wooden idol. I had him wrapped in a bright red and yellow cloth. A San Blas Indian had given him to me when I left Panama. I called him Ebb Tide. He was made of hard mahogany. An eighteen-inch god without eyes, without a mouth and without a sexual organ. Perhaps the sculptor had the same hang-up about drawing the body from the waist down as I'd had in Miss Rollins' fourth-grade class. Ebb Tide was my oldest possession. A string of small, yellowed wild pig's fangs hung from its neck."

Ebb Tide still hangs on a nail just above my living room window. I can see him from where I sit now, scrawling these goddamn final desperate lines before my head can explode like a ball of magnesium tossed into a bucket of water. I have never been sure exactly what kind of luck Ebb Tide was bringing down on me, over the years—but I've never taken the little bastard down or even thought about it, so he must be paying his way. He is perched just in front of the peacock perch outside, and right now there are two high-blue reptilian heads peering over his narrow wooden shoulders.

Does anybody out there believe that?

No?

Well . . . peacocks can't live at this altitude anyway, like Doberman pinschers, sea snakes and gun-toting Chicano missionaries with bad-acid breath.

Why does a hearse horse snicker, hauling a lawyer away?
—CARL SANDBURG

THINGS WERE NOT GOING WELL IN SAN FRANcisco or L.A. at that grim point in Oscar's time, either. To him, it must have seemed like open season on every Brown Buffalo west of the Continental Divide.

The only place he felt safe was down south on the warm foreign soil of the old country. But when he fled back to Mazatlan this time, it was not just to rest but to brood—and to plot what would be his final crazed leap for the great skyhook.

It would also turn out to be an act of such monumental perversity not even that gentle presence of Ebb Tide could change my sudden and savage decision that the Treacherous bastard should have his nuts ripped off with a plastic fork—and then fed like big meat grapes to my peacocks.

The move he made this time was straight out of Jekyll and Hyde—the Brown Buffalo suddenly transmogrified into the form of a rabid hyena. And the bastard compounded his madness by hiding out in the low-rent bowels of Mazatlan like some half-mad leper gone over the brink after yet another debilitating attack of string warts and Herpes Simplex lesions. . . .

This ugly moment came just as my second book, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, was only a week or so away from going to press. We were in the countdown stage and there is no way for anybody who hasn't been there to understand the tension of having a new book *almost* on the presses, but not quite there. The only thing that stood between me and publication was a last minute assault on the very essence of the story by the publishers' libel lawyers. The book was malignant from start to finish, they said, with grievous libels that were totally indefensible. No publisher in his right mind would risk the nightmare of doomed litigation that a book like this was certain to drag us all into.

Which was true, on one level, but on another it seemed like a harmless joke—because almost every one of the most devastating libels they cited involved my old buddy, O. Z. Acosta; a fellow author, prominent Los Angeles attorney and an officer of many courts. Specifically they advised:

We have read the above manuscript as requested. Our principal legal objection is to the description of the author's attorney as using and offering for sale dangerous drugs as well as indulging in other criminal acts while under the influence of such drugs. Although this attorney is not named, he is identified with some detail. Consequently, this material should be deleted as libelous.

In addition, we have the following specific comments:

Page 3: The author's attorney's attempt to break and enter and threats (sic) to bomb a salesman's residence is libelous and should be deleted. Page 4: This page suggests that the author's attorney was driving at an excessive speed while drunk all of which is libelous and should be deleted.

*Page 6: The incident in which the author's attorney advised the author to drive at top speed is libelous and should be deleted. The same applies to the attorney's being party to a fraud at the hotel. Page 31: The statement that the author's attorney will be disbarred is libelous and should be deleted. Page 40: The incident in which the author and his attorney impersonated police officers is libelous and should be deleted. Page 41: The reference to the attorney's _____ * being a "junkie" and shooting people is libelous and should be deleted unless it may be proven true.* *Deleted at the insistence of ROLLING STONE's attorney. *Page 48: The incident in which the author's attorney offers heroin for sale is libelous and should be deleted.*

We do not advise _____ to allow any material in this manuscript noted above as libelous to remain based upon expectancy of proving that it is true by the author's testimony. Inasmuch as the author admits being under the influence of illegal drugs at most if not all times, proof of truth would be extremely difficult through him.

"Balls," I told them. "We'll just have Oscar sign a release. He's no more concerned about this 'libel' bullshit than I am.

"And besides, truth is an absolute defense against libel, anyway . . . Jesus, you don't understand what kind of a monster we're dealing with. You should read the parts I left out. . . ."

But the libel wizards were not impressed—especially since we were heaping all this libelous abuse on a fellow attorney. Unless we got a signed release from Oscar, the book would not go to press.

Okay, I said. But let's do it quick. He's down in Mazatlan now. Send the goddamn thing by air express and he'll sign it and ship it right back.

I think we are in Rats Alley
where the dead men lost their bones.
—T.S. ELIOT, *The Waste Land*

INDEED. SO THEY SENT THE RELEASE OFF AT ONCE . . .and Oscar refused to sign it—but not for any reason a New York libel lawyer could possibly understand. He was, as I'd said, not concerned at all by the libels. Of course they were all true, he said when I finally reached him by telephone at his room in the Hotel Synaloa.

The only thing that bothered him—bothered him very badly—was the fact that I'd repeatedly described him as a 300-pound Samoan.

"What kind of Journalist are you?" he screamed at me. "Don't you have any respect for the truth? I can sink that whole publishing house for *defaming me*, trying to pass me off as one of those waterhead South Sea mongrels."

The libel lawyers were stunned into paranoid silence. "Was it either some kind of arcane legal trick," they wondered, "or was this dope-addled freak really crazy enough to insist on having himself formally identified for all time, with one of the most depraved and degenerate figures in American literature?"

Should his angry threats and demands conceivably be taken seriously? Was it possible that a well-known practicing attorney might not only freely admit to all these heinous crimes, but insist that every foul detail be documented as the absolute truth?

"Why not?" Oscar answered. And the only way he'd sign the release, he added, was in exchange for a firm guarantee from the lawyers that both his name and a suitable photograph of himself be prominently displayed on the book's dust cover.

They had never had to cope with a thing like this —a presumably sane attorney who flatly refused to release any other version of his clearly criminal behavior, except the abysmal naked truth. The concession he was willing to make had to do with his identity throughout the entire book as a "300 pound Samoan." But he could grit his teeth and tolerate that, he said, only because he understood that there was no way to make that many changes at that stage of the deadline without tearing up half the book. In exchange, however, he wanted a formal letter guaranteeing that he would be properly identified on the book jacket.

The lawyers would have no part of it. There was no precedent anywhere in the law for a bizarre situation like this . . . but as the deadline pressures mounted and Oscar refused to bend, it became more and more obvious that the only choice except compromise was to scuttle the book entirely . . . and if *that* happened, I warned them, I had enough plastic forks to mutilate every libel lawyer in New York.

That seemed to settle the issue in favor of a last-minute compromise, and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was finally sent to the printer with Oscar clearly identified on the back as the certified living model for the monstrous "300-pound Samoan attorney" who would soon be a far more public figure than any of us would have guessed at the time.

Alcohol, Hashish, Prussic Acid, Strychnine are weak dilutions.
The surest poison is time.
—EMERSON, *Society and Solitude*

THE LIBEL LAWYERS HAVE NEVER UNDERSTOOD what Oscar had in mind—and, at the time, I didn't understand it myself—one of the darker skills involved in the kind of journalism I normally get involved with has to do with ability to write the Truth about "criminals" without getting them busted—and, in the eyes of the law, *any* person committing a crime is a criminal: whether it's a Hell's Angel laying an oil slick on a freeway exit to send a pursuing motorcycle cop crashing over the high side, a presidential candidate smoking a joint in his hotel room, or a good friend who happens to be a lawyer, an arsonist and a serious drug abuser.

The line between writing truth and providing evidence is very, very thin—but for a journalist working constantly among highly paranoid criminals, it is also the line between trust and suspicion. And that is the difference between having free access to the truth and being treated like a spy. There is no such thing as "forgiveness" on that level; one fuck-up will send you straight back to sportswriting—if you're lucky.

In Oscar's case, my only reason for describing him in the book as a 300-pound Samoan instead of a 250-pound Chicano lawyer was to protect him from the wrath of the L.A. cops and the whole California legal establishment he was constantly at war with. It would not serve either one of our interests, I felt, for Oscar to get busted or disbarred because of something I wrote about him. I had my reputation to protect.

The libel lawyers understood that much; what worried them was that I hadn't protected "my attorney" well enough to protect also the book publisher from a libel suit—just in case my attorney was as crazy as he appeared to be in the manuscript they'd just vetoed . . . or maybe he was crazy like a fox, they hinted; he was, after all, an *attorney*—who'd presumably worked just as hard and for just as many long years as *they* had—to earn his license to steal—and it was inconceivable to them that one of their own kind, as it were, would give all that up on what appeared to be a whim. No, they said, it *must* be a trap; not even a "Brown Power" *lawyer* could afford to laugh at the risk of almost certain disbarment.

Indeed. And they were at least half right—which is not a bad average for lawyers—because Oscar Z. Acosta, Chicano lawyer, very definitely could *not* afford the shitrain of suicidal publicity that he was doing everything possible to bring down on himself. There are a lot of *nice* ways to behave like a criminal—but hiring a camera to have yourself photographed doing it in the road is not one of them. It would have taken a reputation as formidable as Melvin Belli's to survive the kind of grossly illegal behavior that Oscar was effectively admitting by signing that libel release. He might as well have burned his lawyer's license on the steps of the Superior Court building in downtown L.A.

That is what the Ivy League libel lawyers in New York could not accept. They *knew* what that license was worth—at least to them; it averaged out to about $150 an hour—even for a borderline psychotic, as long as he had the credentials.

And Oscar had them—not because his father and grandfather had gone to Yale or Harvard Law; he'd paid his dues at night school, the only Chicano in his class, and his record in the courtroom was better than that of most of colleagues who called him a disgrace to their venal profession.

Which may have been true, for whatever it's worth . . . but what none of us knew at the time of the Great Madness that came so close to making *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* incurably unfit for publication was that we were no longer dealing with O.Z. Acosta, Attorney-at-Law—but with Zeta, the King of Brown Buffalos.

[*Cont. on 57*]

Dr. Hunter S. Thompson (left) and Oscar Zeta Acosta

BUFFALO

[*Cont. from 54*]

LAST TRAIN FOR THE TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN, LAST LEAP FOR THE GREAT SKYHOOK.... GOOD RIDDANCE TO BAD RUBBISH.... HE WAS UGLY & VICIOUS AND HE SOLD LITTLE BABIES TO SAND-NIGGERS . . . . MUTANT RUMORS ON THE WEIRD GRAPEVINE, WILD GHOSTS ON THE BIMINI RUN, LIGHTS IN FAT CITY ....NO END TO THE STORY AND NO GRAVE FOR THE BROWN BUFFALO

IN RETROSPECT IT IS hard to know exactly when Oscar decided to quit the Law just as finally as he'd once quit being a Baptist missionary—but it was obviously a lot earlier than even his few close friends realized, until long after he'd already made the move in his mind, to a new and higher place. The crazy attorney whose "suicidal behavior" so baffled the N.Y. libel lawyers was only the locustlike shell of a thirty-six-year-old neo-prophet who was already long overdue for his gig at the top of the Mountain.

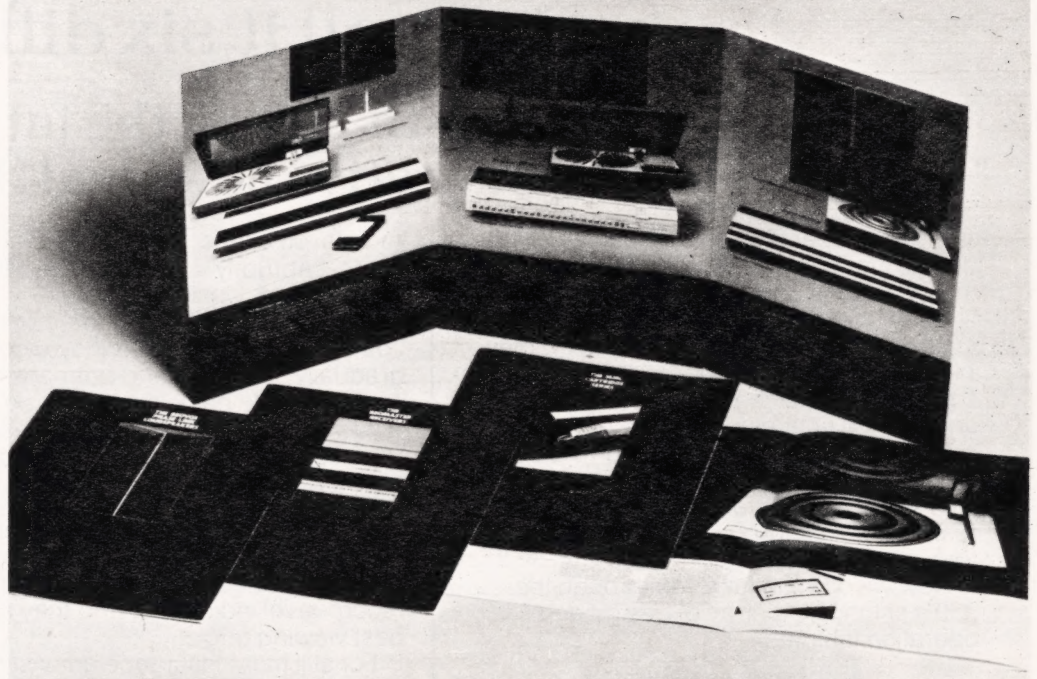
There was no more time to be wasted in the company of lepers and lawyers. The hour had finally struck for the fat spic from Riverbank to start acting like that one man in every century "chosen to speak for his people."

None of this terminal madness was easy to see at the time—not even for me, and I knew him as well as anyone. . . . But not well enough, apparently, to understand the almost desperate sense of failure and loss that he felt when he was suddenly confronted with the stark possibility that he had never *really* been chosen to speak for anybody, except maybe himself—and even that was beginning to look like a halfway impossible task, in the short time he felt he had left.

I had never taken his burning bush trip very seriously—and I still have moments of doubt about how seriously he took it himself. . . . They are very *long* moments, sometimes; and as a matter of fact I think I feel one coming on right now. . . . We should have castrated that brain-damaged thief! That shyster! That blasphemous freak! He was ugly and greasy and he still owes me thousands of dollars!

The truth was not in him, goddamnit! He was put on this earth for no reason at all except to shit in every nest he could con his way into—but only after robbing them first, and selling the babies to sand-niggers. If that treacherous fist-fucker ever comes back to life, he'll wish we'd had the good sense to nail him up on a frozen telephone pole for his thirty-third birthday present.

DISCOVER



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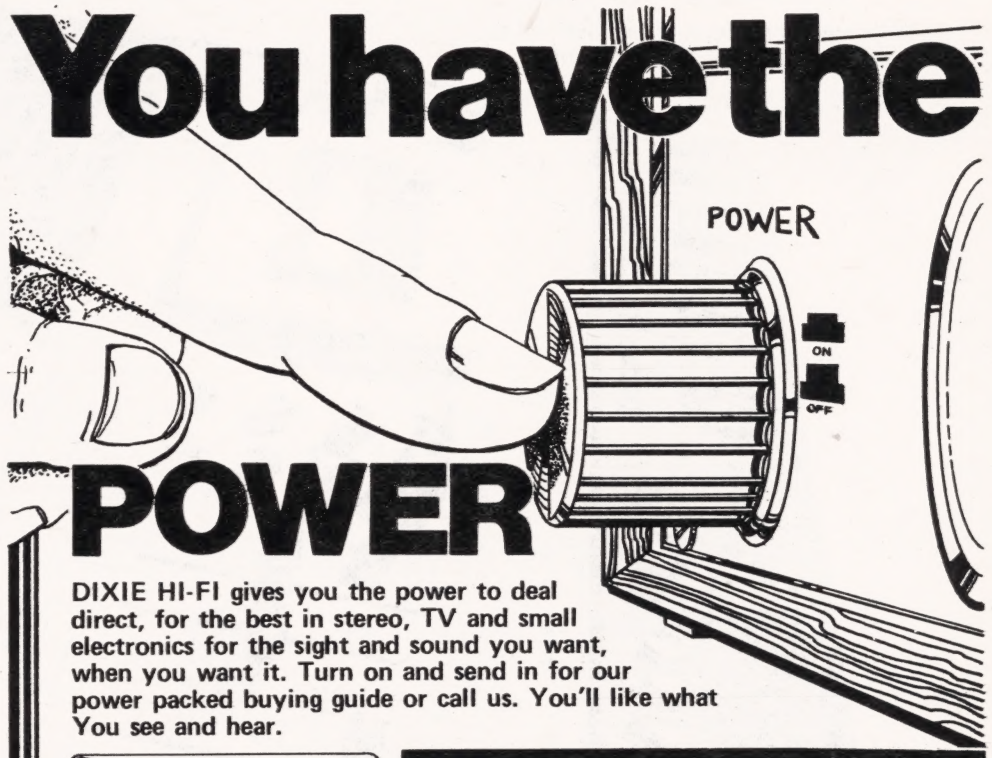

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DO NOT COME BACK Oscar! Wherever you are—stay there! There's no room for you here anymore. Not after all this maudlin gibberish I've written about you. . . . And besides, we have Werner Erhard now. So BURROW DEEP, you bastard, and take all that poison fat with you!

Cazart! And how's that for a left-handed whipsong?

Nevermind. There is no more time for questions — or answers either, for that matter. And I was never much good at this kind of thing, anyway.

The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers.
—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE,
King Henry VI

WELL . . . so much for whipsongs. Nobody laughed when Big Bill sat down to play. He was not into filigree when it came to dealing with lawyers.

And neither am I, at this point. That last outburst was probably unnecessary, but what the hell? Let them drink Drano if they can't take a joke. I'm tired of wallowing around in this goddamn thing.

What began as a quick and stylish epitaph for my allegedly erstwhile 300-pound Samoan attorney has long since gone out of control. Not even Oscar would have wanted an obituary with no end, at least not until he was legally dead, and that will take four more years.

Until then — and probably for many years afterward — the Weird Grapevine will not wither for lack of bulletins, warnings and other twisted rumors of the latest Brown Buffalo sightings. He will be seen at least once in Calcutta, buying nine-year-old girls out of cages on the White Slave Market . . . and also in Houston, tending bar at a roadhouse on South Main that was once the Blue Fox . . . or perhaps once again on the midnight run to Bimini; standing tall on his own hind legs in the cockpit of a fifty-foot black Cigarette boat with a silver Uzi in one hand and a magnum of smack in the other, always running ninety miles an hour with no lights and howling Old Testament gibberish at the top of his bleeding lungs. . . .

It might even come to pass that he will suddenly appear on my porch in Woody Creek on some moonless night when the peacocks are screeching with lust. . . .Maybe so, and that is one ghost who will always be welcome in this house, even with a head full of acid and a chain of bull-maggots around his neck.

Oscar was one of God's own prototypes—a high-powered mutant of some kind who was never even considered for mass production. He was too weird to live and too rare to die—and as far as I'm concerned, that's just about all that needs to be said about him right now. I was tempted for a while to call that poor bastard Drake, down in Coconut Grove, to check a little deeper into that savage tale about Oscar and the Battle of Biscayne Bay —the one that ended with at least one murder and the total destruction of Drake's $48,000 Cigarette boat — but I just don't think I need it right now. . . .

Nobody needs it, in fact—but then nobody really needed Oscar Zeta Acosta either. Or ROLLING STONE. Or Jimmy Carter or the Hindenberg . . . or even the Sloat Diamond.

Jesus! Is there no respect in this world for the perfectly useless dead?

Apparently not . . . and Oscar *was* a lawyer, however reluctant he might have been at the end to admit it. He had a lawyer's cynical view of the Truth — which he felt was not nearly as important to other people as it was to him; and he was never more savage and dangerous than when he felt he was being lied to. He was never much interested in the *concept* of truth; he had no time for what he called "dumb Anglo abstracts."

Condemn'd to drudge, the meanest of the mean and furbish falsehoods for a magazine.
—LORD BYRON

THE TRUTH, to Oscar, was a tool and even a weapon that he was convinced he could not do without—if only because anybody who had more of it than he did would sooner or later try to beat on him with it. Truth was Power—as tangible to Oscar as a fistful of $100 bills or an ounce of pure LSD-25. His formula for survival in a world full of rich Gabaucho fascists was a kind of circle that began at the top with the idea that truth would bring him power, which would buy freedom—to crank his head full of acid so he could properly walk with the King, which would naturally put him even closer to more and finer truths . . . indeed, the full circle.

Oscar believed it, and that was what finally croaked him.

I tried to warn the greedy bastard, but he was too paranoid to pay any attention . . . . Because he was actually a stupid, vicious quack with no morals at all and the soul of a hammerhead shark.

We are better off without him. Sooner or later he would have had to be put to sleep anyway. . . .So the world is a better place, now that he's at least out of sight, if not certifiably dead.

He will not be missed— except perhaps in Fat City, where every light in the town went dim when we heard that he'd finally cashed his check.

One owes respect to the living:
To the Dead one owes
only the truth.
—VOLTAIRE

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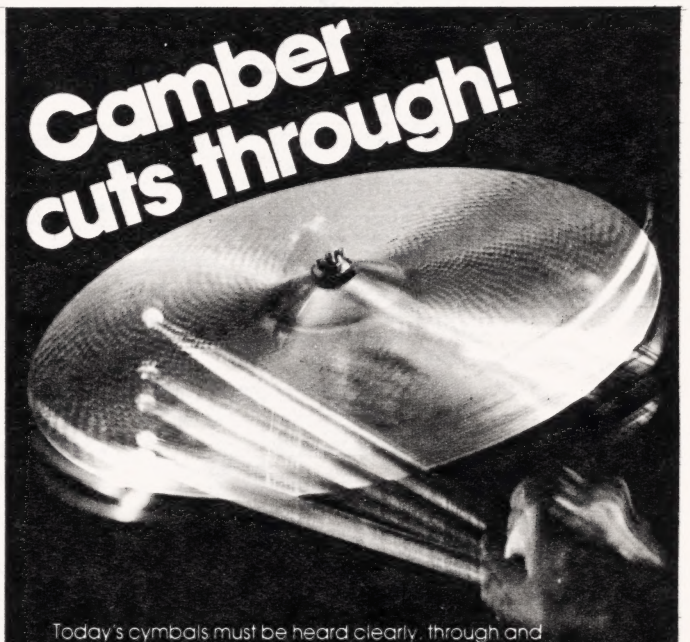

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